

WHAT LABOUR HAS DONE FOR AGRICULTURE

By
GEORGE DALLAS



Published by the Labour Party
PRICE ONE PENNY

What Labour has done for Agriculture and Farm Workers

By GEORGE DALLAS

THE Labour Government, 1924, were in office, in actual Parliamentary time, for only eight and a half months. They were confronted with a sea of troubles and a vast accumulation of problems that had to be dealt with. It will always be to their credit that in spite of all the difficulties they were faced with, they re-established the Agricultural Wages Board with all its wage-fixing machinery. The previous Board had been abolished by the Coalition Government in 1921. From the time of its abolition wages in Agriculture had fallen continuously.

In 1924, when the first Labour Government took office, wages in some cases were as low as £1 per week. The maximum in most districts was 25s. per week. The Labour Government tackled the problem at once. They were hampered in this work by both Liberals and Tories, with the result that the Wages Board Act that was finally passed was not as good as the Labour Government desired. However, as they were in a minority they had to accept amendments in order to get any Act at all.

The Agricultural Wages Regulation Act gave legal powers to fix wages in Agriculture and further legal powers to enforce the payments of these wages when they were fixed. As a result of this Act of the Labour Government, the Agricultural Workers of England and Wales have since then received more than £40,000,000 in wages and overtime rates which they would have never otherwise received. Every Agricultural Worker since 1924 with his wife and family would have had less money and a lower standard of life had it not have been for the Labour Government.

The Tory Government could have established the Agricultural Wages Board. They had the opportunity and they had the power to help the Agricultural

Hand 30

Workers. They did nothing. Agricultural Workers should not forget this.

When the Conservatives defeated the Labour Government in 1924, Mr. Stanley Baldwin gave a definite pledge to the Agricultural Community. He said that if he and his Party were returned to power, they would see

“that Agriculture was not only preserved, but that it would be restored to a position of prosperity as an essential balancing element in the social and economic life of the nation.”

He and his Party fulfilled this pledge by leaving Agriculture after four and a half years of Conservative Government in an infinitely worse position in 1929 than it was in 1924, when they had taken over the reins of office.

The Labour Government, in 1929, had a very difficult situation to face not only in Agriculture, but also with the deepening industrial depression and the growing unemployment. One of the first things they discovered when they came into office was that during the four and a half years of Tory Government there had been widespread violations of the Agricultural Wages Regulation Act. The Agricultural Workers had been and still were being defrauded out of thousands and thousands of pounds in wages to which they were legally entitled. The Labour Government at once, without any delay, appointed six extra inspectors whose job it was to inspect employers' wages books and to take proceedings wherever required to recover all moneys due to the farm workers.

In this connection it should be noted that one of the very first things the present National Government did when they came into power in 1931 was to dismiss these inspectors and thus leave the Agricultural Workers without the protection which the Labour Government had given them. Agricultural Workers everywhere should never forgive and never forget the National Government for this mean and contemptible betrayal.

Land Drainage Act

The first agricultural Act the Labour Government passed was designed with the double object of reclaiming land and putting into employment a great number of workless people. They passed the Land Drainage

Act. A Royal Commission had reported to the Conservative Government that

“1,743,000 acres of land were waterlogged, derelict, and in urgent need of drainage.”

The Conservative Government did nothing. The Labour Government took up the task with a view to putting into good condition as much as possible of this badly deteriorated land. Their endeavour was to make it fit to grow food for the people and at the same time provide employment for Agricultural Workers. They allocated £30 millions for the work, spread over a period of ten years. The great part of this money would have been spent in wages, and would have provided employment for people not only in the rural areas, but also for thousands of miners and other workers in the depressed districts.

I know this could have been done from my own practical experience as chairman of a Drainage Catchment Board under the Act for one of the longest rivers in England.

One of the first things the National Government did when they came into power was to send out a circular in October, 1931, to all the Catchment Drainage Boards, saying that the grants of money for drainage work would be stopped. Since then the land concerned has got worse, and there are all over the country thousands of men out of work who would have been in regular employment if the Labour Government's schemes had been carried out.

In recent months a slight change has taken place. The work the Labour Government intended should be done may now be started in some districts three years late.

Afforestation Grants

With the same objects in view the Labour Government raised the grant for afforestation from £5 millions to £9 millions, and the planting acreage from 225,000 to 353,000, an increase of 128,000 acres.

In this way provision would have been made for safeguarding the timber supplies of the country, and the settling of thousands of families on the land on forest holdings. For a part of the year the men would be employed on forestry work in the district where

they lived, for which they would receive wages. Further they would be provided with a modern up-to-date cottage to live in. For the rest of the year they would be at work on their holding.

Again, the National Government, when they came in, reduced the grants for this work and, further, as a result of their stupid economy, no less than 50 million seedlings and young trees were burned and destroyed. It is almost unbelievable that any Government could be so utterly criminal and idiotic.

Land Utilisation Act

Still continuing their double policy of developing the land and of providing employment, the Labour Government next passed the Land Utilisation Act. This measure is of great importance. It was modified and cut down in the Committee stage and in the House of Lords. Owing to their minority position, the Labour Government had to accept amendments they did not want. These weakened the Act. But in order to get any Bill at all, they had to accept them.

Demonstration Farms

Yet, even as it stands, the Land Utilisation Act is a piece of great legislation. It deals first with the land-owner who will not, or who by incompetence or indolence does not, cultivate the land he calls his own. It gives power to the Minister of Agriculture or the Secretary for Scotland to step in and, if necessary, take drastic action in the matter.

If, after receiving a report from his officials, the Minister is satisfied that any piece of land is in a seriously neglected condition, and that the condition thereof has been caused by the failure of the owner to execute or omit any necessary works of maintenance, the Minister can serve a notice on the owner requiring him to carry out such works as the Minister may specify.

If the owner fails to carry out these instructions in the period allowed, the Minister has power under the Act to step in and take over the land whether the owner wants to sell or not, and carry out the work he thinks necessary.

The Act gives power to the Minister to set up demonstration farms in all parts of the country, so that the very latest and most scientific knowledge with the most up-to-date methods of farming can be tried out and agriculturalists can see and learn what can be done. In the Bill when it was introduced there was power to set up large State farms. The House of Lords, however, threw the clause out.

Land Settlement

But the most interesting part of the Land Utilisation Act is the power conferred to settle people on the land. If the Minister is satisfied that any person who is unemployed and is unable to obtain suitable employment, desires to lease a small-holding and will himself cultivate the holding, and is not possessed of sufficient means to enable him to obtain such a holding from the County Council, the Minister shall have power to provide a holding for that person and lease it to him.

Grants and Loans

The Minister has power under the Act to make grants to the person by way of loan and, where necessary, spread over long periods without any interest, for the purchase of stock, feeding stuffs, fruit trees, fertiliser, or implements required for the purpose of working the small-holding and, further, on top of this,

the Minister has power to grant to the person concerned for the first year a sum not exceeding £50 for the year, or not more than 30s. in any one week.

This is a definite grant, and is not a loan. It is to enable the person settling on the land to get over the difficulties of the first year. Without any question this is the best scheme of land settlement that has ever been produced. The scheme not only applied to the unemployed, but also to Agricultural Workers. It was intended that these schemes would be built up on very large scales. Communities would have grown up and co-operative enterprise developed.

The National Government has made no attempt of any kind to operate the Act, for the simple reason that they have no reasoned or thought-out plan for the development of Agriculture.

Agricultural Marketing

In thinking of land settlement some people would—and quite rightly—raise the question of the advisability of settling people on the land when, as a matter of fact, there are large numbers of people who cannot get a reasonable life or living out of the land at present.

The Labour Government visualised this aspect of agricultural conditions, and their next Act was formulated and passed definitely to deal with it. The Agricultural Marketing Act was designed so that under its schemes the agricultural producer, whether large farmer or small-holder, would be afforded a reasonable remunerative price for his produce.

Twenty-six Days' Fighting

Although all their opposition has now dropped, this Act was strenuously opposed by the Conservatives and by the representatives of the National Farmers' Union. It took something like twenty-six days' fighting before the Bill got through the committee stage alone. If it had not been for the tact and extraordinary patience of Dr. Addison, it is doubtful if the Bill would have ever reached the Statute Book.

This Act is a definite landmark in the history of British Agriculture. It makes a revolutionary change in the marketing of agricultural produce.

It was designed to get rid of the antiquated and chaotic methods of marketing which existed in all parts of the country. One of its objects was to devise methods of reducing the difference in price between what the producer received and what the consumer paid. It should be clearly understood that it is quite definitely a producers' Act. There is no question but that it is a vital and necessary step towards the complete re-organisation of Agriculture.

Farmer's Individualism

Producers had long complained about the prices received for their goods. Instances could be given by the thousands of extraordinarily low figures obtained by the farmer, while the housewife was fleeced in buying the same goods. These complaints came from all parts of the country. Indeed, it was almost the normal state of affairs.

With his characteristic individualism the British farmer found himself helpless. Everywhere he turned he was surrounded by all kinds of vested interests living on the industry and generally doing well, even when Agriculture was doing badly. On the other hand, the farmers had failed to realise that the overseas producers had very carefully graded and standardised their produce and, in consequence, they were taking an ever-increasingly larger and larger share of the home market. They did this because they met the needs of the large business firms in the distributive trade, and also the demand of the consumers.

One outstanding reason for all these distributive businesses buying such large quantities of produce from overseas is that they can buy enormous quantities of uniform quality goods.

The necessities of modern trade demand this. These big business firms want to have the assurance that no matter in what part of the country their shops may be, the goods they sell are of certain definite standards and grades. Up to now it has been almost impossible to buy in large quantities British agricultural produce of standard uniform quality.

As the Co-operative Societies and the large multiple stores have been steadily doing a larger and larger share of the retail trade of the country, the British farmers' methods increasingly handicapped themselves in their own market, with the result that they were getting a smaller and smaller share of the home trade. The British farmer on his individual own was unable to meet the needs of the modern market. In the face of large-scale distribution he was absolutely helpless.

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY
OF NEWCASTLE
LIBRARY

If British Agriculture had to survive, fundamental changes had to take place. The producers had to combine. They had to bulk their produce. They had to grade it. Standardisation became the order of the day. In other words, the farmers had to co-operate. We had reached a stage in Agriculture when it was co-operate or perish.

The Agricultural Marketing Act was the first revolutionary step to putting the marketing of British agricultural produce on a sound business basis.

Consumers' Committees

It was intended, of course, to safeguard the consumer from exploitation. In the Act there is a clause setting up a consumers' committee to watch consumers' interests. The Minister himself has power to intervene and ask for the revision of any scheme which is acting adversely against the interests of the community. The Act, being a producers' measure, is, however, designed to see that producers get a fair deal.

Experience of the working of the Act will reveal its strength and its weakness. Whatever changes may take place, marketing organisation will develop and remain.

The Labour Party has, however, no responsibility for any of the details of any of the present marketing schemes. The Labour Government definitely recognised that to exploit either the consumers or the workers would be of no advantage to British Agriculture. A fair deal can be given to British Agricultural producers without imposing a burden on the consumers. On the other hand, consumers have to recognise that the Agriculturalists are entitled to a reasonable remuneration for their labours and their outlays.

Agricultural reconstruction under the jurisdiction of a Labour Government would reconcile the interests of the producers and the consumers.

The Registration of Live Stock Act

The next Act dealing with Agriculture was a technical one. In its own way it was very important, and in the

coming years will have very considerable influence on the quality of our cattle. It was the Registration of Live Stock Act. We have always been very particular about the breeding of horses, but cattle, which provide us with our meat and our milk, have been given little or no consideration.

Better Beef, Better Milk

After 1st August this year all this will be changed, and we shall make a big step forward towards eliminating low-grade and tubercular cattle. So that we shall get not only first-class meat, but in the end pure and disease-free milk.

Cottages With Low Rents for Agricultural Workers

A further law was passed dealing with another phase of rural life—the Housing Rural Authorities Act. It is no exaggeration to say that so far as England and Wales are concerned, there are slums in parts of the countryside as bad as can be found in any town or city. Further, practically no building has taken place in the rural districts for the poorly-paid farm workers.

This Act was designed to build cottages for farm servants and Agricultural Workers and other workers in rural areas whose economic condition was substantially the same as the farm workers. The Labour Government, who were anxious to have the cottages built, refused to rely on the rural district councils and reactionary county councils, whose members are generally landlords and large farmers.

National Housing Authority

The Act gives power to a National Housing Committee set up definitely for this job alone. Increased grants were given so that the cottages could be let at extremely low rents to fit in with the farm workers' low wages.

A start was to be made with building 40,000 cottages. As soon as the National Government came in, they stopped the scheme, and only some 2,000 in the whole of the British Isles have been built under this Act in the last three years.

Unemployment Insurance

The question of Unemployment Insurance for Agricultural Workers was next tackled. There had been no good reason for excluding Agricultural Workers from the benefits of Unemployment Insurance. With the increase, in recent years, of unemployment in Agriculture the matter had become a positive scandal. The Labour Government drew up a scheme to bring all Agriculture within the scope of a special scheme of Unemployment Insurance. The details were published and plans prepared, but the Labour Government was defeated before they could make it the law of the land. It is absolutely certain that if the Labour Government had lasted a little longer every Agricultural Worker would have had the protection of Unemployment Insurance.

I am certain it must come as a revelation to many people that Labour as a minority Government in only two and a quarter years was able to pass so much legislation to benefit Agriculture.

The more one examines the record of the Labour Government of 1929-31, the more it is recognised that the output of measures passed through the House of Commons was really remarkable. It is doubtful, indeed, if ever before in the history of Parliament that so much legislation was attempted.

There were Bills dealing with mining, traffic, education, trade unions, electoral reform, transport and unemployment, and many others—all in the space of two and a quarter years. Many old parliamentary hands with long experience repeatedly stated that they had never known or heard of any Parliament which had worked at such a high pressure.

The House of Commons sat late nearly all the time into the early hours of the morning, and frequently sat all night to get the various Bills passed. On top of all the Bills I have mentioned was the continuous rush of farming legislation.

There can be no doubt that the agricultural legislation for those two and a quarter years is one of the most amazing records in our Parliamentary history. Not only has it never been surpassed, it

has never at any time under any Government been equalled. It is a record of which the Labour Party has every reason to be proud.

Every candidate in every agricultural constituency can claim with perfect truth that no Government or Party has ever done so much to help and develop British Agriculture on a sound business basis as the second Labour Government.

In every agricultural constituency we can claim again, with perfect truth, that no Party has done so much to help the Agricultural Workers as the Labour Party ; and no Government had done so much to put Agriculture on a sound economic and business basis as the Labour Government of 1929-1931.

PUBLICATIONS ON AGRICULTURE

Pamphlets

THE LAND AND THE NATIONAL PLANNING OF AGRICULTURE

HOW LABOUR WILL SAVE AGRICULTURE

Prices, post free: 1 copy, 2½d.; 12 copies, 1s. 6d.

WHAT LABOUR HAS DONE FOR AGRICULTURE. By George Dallas

THE ECONOMIC PLANNING OF AGRICULTURE. By Sir Stafford Cripps, M.P.

A NEW DEAL FOR THE FARM WORKER. By John Dugdale

Prices, post free: 1 copy, 1½d.; 12 copies, 9d.

Leaflets

No. 13 WHAT RURAL ENGLAND WANTS

No. 15 THREE KINDS OF BOGIES

No. 16 WHY NOT DEVELOP BRITAIN?

No. 17 FARM WORKERS!

No. 26 FLOODS AND WATER FAMINES

Price 4s. per 1,000, carriage paid

No. 24 GET TOGETHER

No. 25 EVERY AGRICULTURE WORKER SHOULD BE A TRADE UNIONIST

No. 27 THE LAND WORKER'S HOME

Price 3s. per 1,000, carriage paid

From THE LABOUR PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT,
Transport House, Smith Square, London, S.W.1

POLICY PAMPHLETS

THE NATIONAL PLANNING OF TRANSPORT

THE REORGANISATION OF THE ELECTRIC SUPPLY INDUSTRY

THE LAND AND THE NATIONAL PLANNING OF AGRICULTURE

SOCIALISM AND THE CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE

LABOUR'S FOREIGN POLICY

THE COLONIAL EMPIRE

Prices, post free: 1 copy, 2½d.; 12 copies, 1s. 6d.

ANTI-FASCIST PUBLICATIONS

NAZIS, NAZISM, NAZIDOM

Price, post free, 2½d.; 12 copies, 1s. 6d.

WHAT IS THIS FASCISM?

FASCISM THE ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

Prices, post free: 1 copy, 1½d.; 12 copies, 9d.

Leaflets

No. 28 THE FRUITS OF FASCISM

Price 4s. per 1,000, carriage paid

No. 29 THE SPOTLIGHT ON THE BLACKSHIRTS

Price 6s. per 1,000, carriage paid

From THE LABOUR PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT,
Transport House, Smith Square, London, S.W.1

Prices. Post free :			
1 copy	1½d.
12 copies	9d.
100 „	1s. 6d.

From the
Labour Publications Department,
Transport House, Smith Square,
London, S.W.1.

Printed by
THE VICTORIA HOUSE
PRINTING Co., LTD. (T.U.
in all Departments),
Tudor St., London, E.C.4